Received: 7 November 2019 | Revised: 8 February 2020 | Accepted: 14 February 2020

DOI: 10.1111/micc.12613

REVIEW

Microcirculation WILEY

The systemic microcirculation in dialysis populations

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Funding information
Jennifer Williams is funded by a Kidney Research UK Training Fellowship TF_013_20151127.

Abstract

In a rapidly expanding population of patients with chronic kidney disease, including 2 million people requiring renal replacement therapy, cardiovascular mortality is 15 times greater than the general population. In addition to traditional cardiovascular risk factors, more poorly defined risks related to uremia and its treatments appear to contribute to this exaggerated risk. In this context, the microcirculation may play an important early role in cardiovascular disease associated with chronic kidney disease. Experimentally, the uremic environment and dialysis have been linked to multiple pathways causing microvascular dysfunction. Coronary microvascular dysfunction is reflected in remote and more easily studied vascular beds such as the skin. There is increasing evidence for a correlation between systemic microvascular dysfunction and adverse cardiovascular outcomes. Systemic microcirculatory changes have not been extensively investigated across the spectrum of chronic kidney disease. Recent advances in non-invasive techniques studying the microcirculation in vivo in man are increasing the data available particularly in patients on hemodialysis. Here, we review current knowledge of the systemic microcirculation in dialysis populations, explore whether non-invasive techniques to study its function could be used to detect early stage cardiovascular disease, address challenges faced in studying this patient cohort and identify potential future avenues for research.

KEYWORDS

cardiovascular disease, dialysis, in vivo techniques, systemic microcirculation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Systemic microvascular dysfunction has been associated with increased cardiovascular morbidity[1,2] and mortality.[3,4] This association is potentially being driven by shared underlying pathological events instrumental in both macro and microvascular disease. Persistent changes in vascular tone lead to structural remodelling. Repeated activation of the vascular endothelium by pro-atherogenic insults results in an imbalance in the production of vasoactive substances, inflammation, and a pro-thrombotic state.[5] In combination, these changes compromise the structural and functional ability of the microcirculation to compensate for fluctuating demands.

It is in the coronary circulation, where up to 80% of overall resistance resides in the microvessels,[6] that dysfunction has been most convincingly linked to clinically relevant outcomes. The presence of

Abbreviations: Ach, acetylcholine; eGFR, estimated glomerular filtration rate; NO, nitric oxide; RBC, red blood cell; SDF, side-stream darkfield; SNP, sodium nitroprusside.

coronary microvascular and endothelial dysfunction not only predicts subsequent cardiovascular events,[7-9] but themselves constitute the first stage of atherosclerotic coronary artery disease.[10,11] Up to 40% of patients referred for angiography following "typical cardiac chest pain" are found to have normal epicardial coronary arteries.[12] These patients can be assumed to have a combination of functional and structural coronary microvascular disease contributing to abnormal myocardial perfusion.

This impairment of coronary microvascular structure and function is reflected in concurrent changes in remote and more easily studied vascular beds. For example, significant reductions in dermal capillary numbers have been demonstrated in patients with "typical cardiac chest pain" despite normal coronary arteries.[13] Peripheral microvascular dysfunction has, therefore, been used as a surrogate for dysfunction of the coronary microcirculation.

There are a growing number of novel methods being utilized to study the structure and function of the systemic microcirculation in vivo in multiple patient cohorts, including those with chronic kidney disease.[14]

2 | WHY STUDY THE MICROCIRCULATION IN END-STAGE RENAL DISEASE?

The global prevalence of chronic renal disease is upwards of 13%[15] and more than 2 million people worldwide are dependent on renal replacement therapies.[16] In this population, rates of cardiovascular mortality are 15 times those of the general population.[17] Although traditional cardiovascular risk factors are prevalent within the dialysis population, their presence alone does not fully account for this exaggerated risk.[18] In this context, systemic microcirculatory dysfunction may be a significant contributor to cardiovascular burden.

Patients with end-stage renal disease who are on dialysis are at significant risk for systemic microvascular dysfunction. Uremia is associated with endothelial cell activation,[19] impaired endothelial repair,[20] oxidative stress,[21] and impaired NO bioavailability. Additionally, these patients exist in a state of chronic inflammation.[22] Levels of inflammatory mediators such as Interleukin-6 and tumor necrosis factor are strongly correlated with eGFR,[23] both are associated with endothelial dysfunction.[24,25] Other dialysis specific risk factors include repeated myocardial stunning and hemodynamic perturbation of vascular beds[26] during hemodialysis and exposure to non-physiological dialysis fluids in peritoneal dialysis.[26]

Multiple studies have demonstrated links between surrogate markers of endothelial dysfunction and chronic renal disease. These include; circulating endothelial surface layer components,[27] markers of inflammation and amino acids released by the endothelial cells in response to damage,[28,29] peptides known to inhibit pro-atherogenic changes[30] and endothelial dysfunction as measured in larger vessels.[31]

3 | THE SYSTEMIC MICROCIRCULATION IN DIALYSIS PATIENTS

Techniques that directly and non-invasively study in vivo alterations in microvascular structure[32,33] and function[28,34-36] are increasingly being used to expand our knowledge of the relationship between chronic renal disease and microcirculatory dysfunction. Perturbation of microvascular function in patients with chronic renal disease has been reproducibly demonstrated in different vascular beds, including skin,[28,36,37] sublingual,[27,32,38] and coronary.[39]

3.1 | Cutaneous microcirculation

The cutaneous microcirculation, the most easily accessible vascular bed, has been of interest in patients on dialysis since histological alterations were first demonstrated in these patients in the 1980s. Skin biopsies from hemodialysis patients without known macrovascular disease or diabetes demonstrated thickening of the basement membrane, endothelial activation, and chronic inflammatory cell infiltrates in cutaneous capillaries.[40] The extent of these changes correlated with the length of time these patients had been on hemodialysis.[41] In vivo the nail-fold capillary bed is easily visualized microscopically. Morphological changes here have also been correlated with duration of dialysis.[42] Reduction in capillary numbers is important as it reduces the surface area available for exchange, jeopardizing tissue health. Capillary rarefaction has been demonstrated in the nail-fold capillaries of pediatric hemodialysis patients[33] compared with healthy, "height-age" matched controls. The pediatric population is interesting to study with regards the microcirculation as unlike their adult counterparts, they often have a single renal limited pathology. This helps to differentiate microcirculatory pathology attributable to uremia and its treatments from that attributable to other systemic pathologies, for example, diabetes. This finding has been replicated in adult hemodialysis cohorts[43,44] well matched for age, blood pressure, and BMI with healthy controls.

Due to its role in temperature regulation, human skin has a high vasodilatory reserve and can change its flow more than a hundred-fold in response to metabolic, thermal, and pharmacologic stimuli. Relative changes in skin blood flow can be easily and non-invasively measured using laser Doppler based techniques[45] (Figure 1). Even in the resting state, oscillations in microvascular flow are modulated by multiple physiological factors. Spectral analysis can be used to sub-divide laser Doppler acquired recordings according to their frequency into those representing; endothelial activity, sympathetic activity, vascular myogenic activity, respiratory activity, and heart activity.[14] Reports of baseline skin blood flow in dialysis patients did not initially seem to be significantly different to healthy controls.[28,34,46-48] However, when examined in more detail subtle differences were apparent. Although the averaged flux was not different, "hot spots" or distinct spots of high perfusion were reduced and significant impairments were noted in the frequency domains

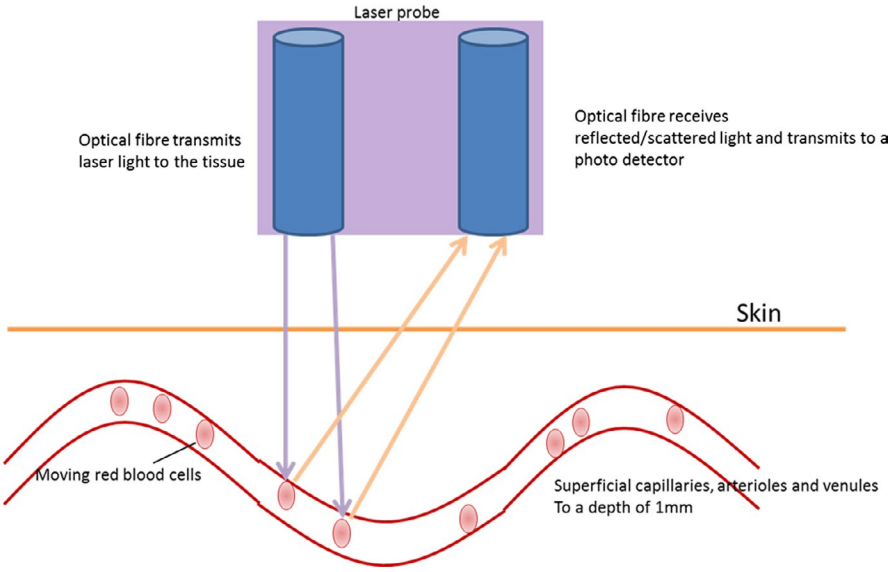

FIGURE 1 Schematic representation of the principles of Laser Doppler measured flux. Laser Doppler technology measures blood flow in the microcirculation to a tissue depth of typically 1 mm. Measurements are based on the Doppler principle whereby monochromatic light changes wavelength when it is reflected by moving objects, in this case RBCs. The magnitude and frequency of the changes in wavelength are related to the number and velocity of the moving cells, termed RBC flux[47]

corresponding to endothelial, sympathetic, and cardiac activity in dialysis patients compared with controls.[36]

Maximal vasodilation of skin blood vessels can be achieved by localized heating to between 42 and 44°C.[49] A reactive hyperemia can also be provoked by a brief period of arterial occlusion[50] (Figure 2). Impairments in the maximal vasodilatory response to heating[36,46] and maximal post-occlusive flow[28,36] have been reported in hemodialysis patients compared with healthy controls.

In their study of 63 hemodialysis patients and 33 healthy controls, Stewart and colleagues[36] reported a delay in the maximal vasodilatory response to heating in the dialysis patients compared with controls. However, they were only able to demonstrate a significant reduction in the size of the maximal post-occlusive flow compared with controls in those hemodialysis patients with known diabetes and cardiovascular disease, not the cohort as a whole. A smaller study (16 hemodialysis patients versus 16 controls),[28] wherein, all participants were "free of concomitant diseases causing alterations in endothelium-dependant vasomotion," did report a reduction in maximal post-occlusive flow in the dialysis cohort compared with controls. As would be expected, their dialysis group was significantly more hypertensive than their healthy controls and given that even borderline hypertension effects the microcirculation this may have contributed to the microvascular dysfunction observed.

More direct interrogation of this apparent reduction in microvascular function can be achieved by combining laser Doppler measurements with iontophoretic application of vasoactive substances[51] (Figure 3) to investigate which discreet areas of microvascular function are impaired. Impairments of both endothelial-dependant and -independent responses have been demonstrated in hemodialysis patients compared with both age, sex, and BMI-matched healthy controls[28,34] and pre-dialysis chronic renal disease patients with comparable cardiovascular burden.[52]

3.2 | Sublingual microcirculation

More recently, SDF imaging has allowed for direct visualization of flow in other vascular beds with a mucosal covering. The most commonly studied is the sublingual bed[53,54] (Figures 4 and 5). To date the only publish study using SDF to examine chronic changes in

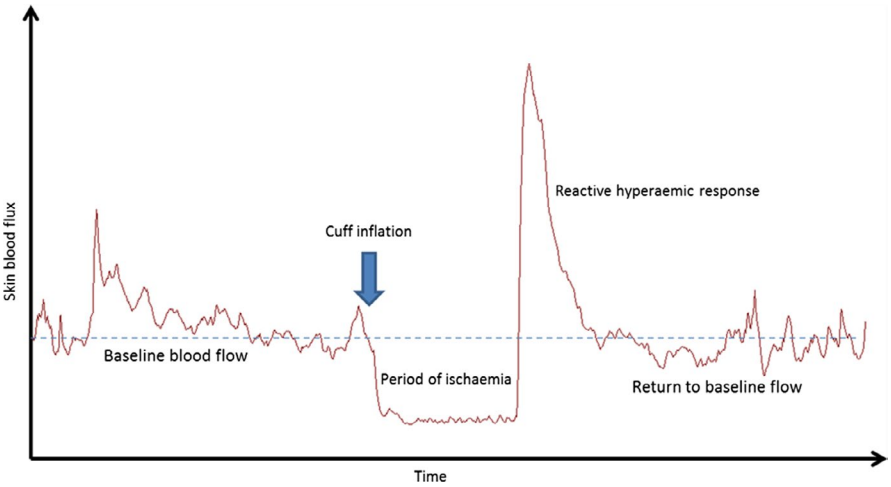

FIGURE 2 Representative laser Doppler trace obtained before, during, and after a brief period of arterial occlusion. A reactive hyperemia can be induced by a brief period of arterial occlusion using a cuff placed around the upper arm or leg. This response takes the form of a post-ischemic flow initially many times faster than normal followed by exponential decay to baseline.[54] This is a complex response which remains incompletely understood; however, NO appears to play only a minor role

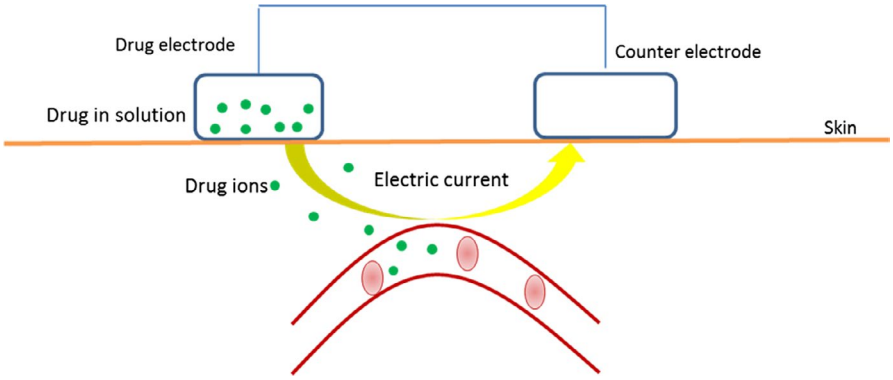

FIGURE 3 Schematic representation of iontophoretic delivery of vasoactive substances. Iontophoresis delivers charged pharmacological agents in solution to a localized area of skin by applying an opposing electrical current. Laser Doppler technology in combination with iontophoretic application of vasoactive substances to the skin allows study of aspects of the vasodilatory capacity of dermal vessels. Traditionally, ACh and SNP are used to provoke endothelium-dependant and endothelium-independent vasodilation, respectively[51]

FIGURE 4 Acquisition of SDF images. Hand held microscopes use side-stream dark field imaging to produce high-contrast real-time videos of the sublingual vessels

sublingual vessel density and flow in dialysis patients,[32] reported a reduction in total and perfused vessel density plus increased vessel flow heterogeneity compared with controls. This was particularly pronounced in the very small vessels (diameter < 20 μm).[32]

Assessment of the sublingual circulation also provides an opportunity to non-invasively assess another component of the vascular system, the glycocalyx. The glycocalyx covers the luminal surface of endothelial cells. It is a negatively charged network of proteoglycans, glycosaminoglycans, and plasma constituents, which acts as an interface between the blood and the vascular wall. The glycocalyx has important regulatory and protective roles including, regulating vascular wall permeability, mechano-transduction, and inhibiting leukocyte adhesion. It is susceptible to damage from oxidative stress, which may arise from inflammation, ischemia, hyperglycemia, or other causes.[55] Due to its delicate nature, study of the glycocalyx is challenging. Historical approaches have included measurement of total volume using tracers, and measuring shed glycocalyx components in plasma. Side-stream darkfield-acquired images (Figure 5) can now be combined with Glycocheck© software to analyze spatial and temporal variations in erythrocyte column width within the microvasculature.[56] When the cell-impermeable glycocalyx is damaged, circulating red cells can travel closer to the endothelium. Using this approach, loss of glycocalyx barrier properties has been demonstrated in a mixed cohort of hemodialysis and peritoneal dialysis patients[27] and has been found to associate with diminished eGFR and with increased circulating levels of shed endothelial surface layer components syndecan-1 and thrombomodulin.[38]

3.3 | Coronary microcirculation

The ability of the coronary microcirculation to adapt to changing demands is vital. Coronary flow reserve is the maximum flow resulting from stress vasodilatation of coronary arteries and the coronary microcirculation, measured using positron emission tomography or magnetic resonance imaging. In this context, 90% of myocardial blood flow takes place through vessels with diameter <150 μm, which penetrate the walls of the myocardium.[57] Coronary flow reserve is, therefore, a test of both endothelial dysfunction and coronary microvascular reserve. It is expressed as the ratio of hyperemic to basal diastolic peak velocities, with a value above two considered normal. Low coronary flow reserve indicates a reduced ability to appropriately increase flow in response to increased oxygen demand. Coronary flow reserve has been found to be significantly lower in dialysis patients compared with healthy controls who were well matched for age, sex, BMI, and blood pressure.[39,58] In patients with angiographically normal coronary arteries, 50% of the dialysis cohort were found to have coronary flow reserve <2 compared with only 5% in the control group of non-dialysis patients.[39]

4 | POTENTIAL CONFOUNDING FACTORS

Caution must be exercised in attributing all the alterations observed in the above studies to renal failure and its treatments. Many patients with end-stage kidney disease have co-morbid illnesses which may also affect the systemic microcirculation, most notably hypertension, and diabetes mellitus. Several of the studies discussed above exclude from their control group of "healthy volunteers" those

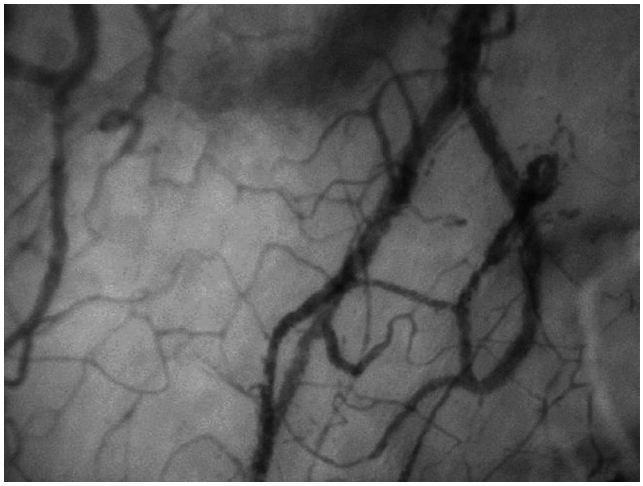

FIGURE 5 Example of sublingual microcirculation as visualized using SDF imaging. SDF is based on the principle that scattered green light is absorbed by hemoglobin in RBCs; therefore, any vessels containing RBCs can be visualized using this technique. These images can be used to assess; vessel density, perfusion indices, and heterogeneity[45,46]

with these conditions but hypertension, diabetes, and other co-morbidities are present in a large proportion of the dialysis group.[32,36] In these studies, measured differences between groups are likely to represent the combined effects of chronic uremia, dialysis, and other co-morbidities.

Even in otherwise well matched cohorts, dialysis patients frequently have increased systolic blood pressure compared with their control counterparts.[32,33] Therefore, in addition to their dialysis patients and healthy controls, Farkas and colleagues studied a third group of age-matched patients with essential hypertension.[28] They were able to demonstrate a significant reduction in both endothelium-dependant and independent vasodilatation in their dialysis patients compared with controls and those with hypertension.

5 | ARE MICROCIRCULATORY CHANGES ASSOCIATED WITH CLINICAL OUTCOMES?

A link between microvascular dysfunction and adverse cardiovascular outcomes has been demonstrated in other populations.[3,4,59,60] Vascular dysfunction in the skin has been demonstrated to correlate with coronary disease[61] and be an independent marker for cardiovascular disease in patients with Type 2 diabetes.[62] As these techniques become better understood and increasingly used in renal cohorts, interest has turned to how they may be used as biomarkers to identify high risk patients and facilitate intervention at an earlier stage.

Coronary microvascular rarefaction has been postulated as contributory to sudden cardiac death in the dialysis population.[63] In a cohort study of nearly 4000 individuals encompassing the whole spectrum of chronic renal disease, coronary flow reserve was shown to be strongly associated with cardiovascular death independent of chronic renal disease stage.[64] Adjusting for coronary flow reserve in chronic renal disease 4,5 and dialysis-dependant groups attenuated their risk of cardiovascular death by 10%, supporting the concept that coronary microvascular dysfunction may underlie some of the increased mortality associated with chronic renal disease.

In separate multi-variate regression analyses, microvascular impairment as measured by forearm post-ischemic vasodilatation[65] and coronary flow reserve[63] were found to be independently associated with all-cause mortality in hemodialysis patients.

Microvascular dysfunction of the coronary and peripheral circulations has also been correlated with outcome measures known to have negative prognostic implications such as hypoalbuminemia[66,67] and right ventricular dysfunction.[68]

Chronic renal disease mineral bone disease can cause large vessel calcification, a strong predictor of cardiovascular death in hemodialysis patients.[69] There is some evidence for an association between large vessel calcification and microvascular dysfunction in hemodialysis patients, those with femoral artery calcification exhibited lower maximal vasodilatory responses to ACh and SNP than both controls and hemodialysis patients without large vessel calcification.[34] There is also increasing evidence of a relationship between markers of worsening chronic renal disease mineral bone disease and microvascular abnormalities in the absence of large vessel calcification. Dermal capillary rarefaction and impaired coronary flow reserve have been associated with increasing levels of both iPTH[33] and phosphorous[43,64] in chronic renal disease cohorts. Even in cohorts with normal renal function, serum phosphate concentrations have been negatively correlated with post-occlusive capillary recruitment[70] and endothelial dysfunction in larger vessels.[71]

Patients at risk of other non-cardiovascular disease outcomes which significantly impact on morbidity and quality of life, such as wound healing have also been identified using these techniques. Those patients with lower skin blood flow both before and during hemodialysis, as measured by laser Doppler, have been shown to be at greater risk of developing wounds and skin defects.[66] All patients in this study who later went on to develop a skin defect had evidence of intradialytic "critical perfusion" at the microvascular level in at least one measured area, although none exhibited intradialytic hypotension.

6 | WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF CHRONIC DIALYSIS?

Cardiovascular risk increases as patients progress through the stages of chronic renal disease (classified as stages 1–5 with progressive falls in glomerular filtration rate and increasing albuminuria) and with time on dialysis.[72] Is microvascular impairment similarly related to stage of chronic renal disease and time on dialysis?

It has been found that even the creation of an arteriovenous fistula in preparation for hemodialysis may have systemic microvascular effects. In pre-dialysis patients, successful formation of an arteriovenous fistula led to a reduction in endothelial-dependant

vasodilation in the fistula arm. Following fistula creation, these patients also exhibited a reduction in non-endothelium-dependant vasodilation in the contralateral arm, indicating that localized changes to the structure of the macrocirculation can lead to widespread changes in the microcirculation. This was in contrast to those patients who had primary arteriovenous fistula failure, who exhibited no recordable local or systemic changes.[73]

Cross-sectional studies also provide evidence for a relationship between stage of kidney disease and microcirculatory dysfunction. Plasma levels of shed glycocalyx components such as syndecan-1 and markers of endothelial activation such as angiopoietin-2 correlate inversely with eGFR.[38] Retinal microvessels also narrow progressively with each stage of chronic kidney disease.[74] Additionally, histopathological evidence of endothelial activation and infiltration by inflammatory cells in dermal capillaries[40,41] and circulating levels of adhesion molecules such as sVCAM-1 correlate with duration of dialysis.[75] The potential effects of renal replacement therapy itself on the microcirculation remain less well defined. Using SDF technology, Dane and his colleagues were able to demonstrate impaired glycocalyx integrity associated with worsening eGFR. However, in their end-stage renal disease group (n = 23) no statistically significant difference was seen between the dialysis patients (n = 9) and patients with end-stage renal disease who were not on dialysis (n = 14).[38] Common to many of the studies presented here small sample size may have contributed to the lack of statistically significant findings.

A large American cohort study found that although coronary microvascular function assessed by coronary flow reserve was 23% lower in dialysis patients compared with controls with preserved kidney function, this reduction occurred early in chronic kidney disease, with a nadir being reached in chronic renal disease stage 4.[64] The authors found no additional reductions in stage 5 or 5D. However, it is important to note that the chronic kidney disease stage 4 patients were on average 10 years older than the dialysis group and had a higher incidence of known ischemic heart disease and oral nitrate use. It is possible in light of this that survivor bias has limited the apparent extent of microvascular dysfunction detected in the patients with chronic kidney disease stage 5 in this retrospective study. Some of these issues could be addressed by longitudinal studies directly investigating microvascular function in dialysis cohorts. INTHEMO is an ongoing 2-year study primarily designed to assess the effects of hemodialysis intensity on micro and macrovascular parameters.[76] In a preliminary report, these investigators found no statistically significant change in glycocalyx parameters at 6 months follow-up compared with baseline. They did, however, note significant heterogeneity in the degree and direction of change of calculated glycocalyx properties at 6 months, and data at study completion are awaited. One important limitation of historical studies may be the effect of the hemodialysis procedure itself. The microcirculation is inherently dynamic, and as described below, timing of microvascular measurements with regards to the patients hemodynamic therapy itself may have significant impact on results. Standardization of timing of measurements with respect to hemodialysis therapy is an important consideration for future studies.

7 | WHAT ARE THE ACUTE EFFECTS OF DIALYSIS?

Hemodialysis has been shown to cause varying degrees of macrohemodynamic instability in patients often because of ultrafiltration of fluid, observed clinically as intradialytic hypotension. Recurrent intradialytic hypotension is considered to have negative prognostic implications.[77] Studies of the sublingual microcirculation using SDF during a single hemodialysis session have demonstrated a reduction in microvascular flow and decrease in the proportion of the microcirculation that is perfused through the course of the treatment.[78,79] This reduced flow in all microvessels has been attributed to a reduction in circulating volume secondary to ultrafiltration. In some studies, reduced microvascular perfusion has been demonstrated in patients undergoing isolated ultrafiltration but not in those undergoing hemodialysis with linear ultrafiltration.[80] This finding is supported by data showing the reduced flow may be partially corrected by a maneuver designed to increase central venous filling.[78] These microcirculatory changes were independent of macrohemodynamic changes, for example, blood pressure, implying an element of compensation by the microcirculation.

Decreased intradialytic perfusion has also been demonstrated in the peripheral circulation.[66,81] However, it has been suggested that changes in perfusion here may be dependent on the patient's pre-dialysis volume status. Hypervolemic patients who were ultrafiltrated to normovolemia had improved skin perfusion,[82] this was accompanied by a decrease in arterial and venous pressure and proposed to be as a result of decreased myogenic response as a local auto regulatory effect. Another potential mechanism could be interstitial fluid removal with reduced external compression of vessels.

Significant alterations in hemodynamics and shear stress result in stimuli noxious to the glycocalyx including oxidative stress[83] and inflammation.[84] An increase in plasma shed glycocalyx constituents has been demonstrated over the course of a 4 hour dialysis session. However, this was not accompanied by a deterioration in sublingual glycocalyx parameters, potentially reflecting differential responses to hemodialysis in different vascular beds.[85] Importantly, the reliability of plasma shed endothelial components as a marker of endothelial damage in patients with significant renal impairment has been challenged, due to decreased renal excretion and unknown dialysis clearance.[86]

It has been suggested that hemodialysis may not be entirely detrimental to the microcirculation. The process of hemodialysis results in the release of local vasodilatory substances[87] and removal of circulating inhibitors of endothelial function such as; asymmetrical dimethylarginine, an inhibitor of endothelial NO production.[88,89] Improvements in retinal microvascular function during single hemodialysis sessions have been demonstrated in several studies.[90,91] However, these potentially beneficial effects appear to be transient, returning to baseline within hours.[88,92] This may, however, help to explain some of the heterogeneity in the literature and highlights the importance of timing of investigations with regards dialysis therapy when designing and evaluating data in studies of the microcirculation.

8 | IS MICROCIRCULATORY DYSFUNCTION MODIFIABLE?

As there is evidence of a relationship between microcirculatory function and eGFR[38,41] it could be postulated that successful restoration of excretory function should improve microcirculatory parameters. Renal transplantation is the preferred mode of renal replacement therapy for all eligible patients as cardiovascular outcomes and quality of life are improved compared with dialysis.

Early skin biopsy studies indicated that "uremia associated microangiopathy" could be at least partially reversed by successful transplantation.[93] Using data and samples from a large biobank, a retrospective study of patients receiving their first renal transplant having previously been on dialysis, found that sVCAM-1 levels (a marker of endothelial injury) fell within 1 month of transplantation and continued to decline for at least 2 years[75] supporting an improvement in endothelial function with improvement in renal function.

Cross-sectional studies using SDF imaging in the sublingual circulation have demonstrated significant deterioration in glycocalyx and microvascular perfusion parameters in dialysis patients compared to age-matched healthy controls and renal transplant recipients.[32,38] At a median of 5 years post-transplant, the glycocalyx parameters of patients with a stable functioning transplant were indistinguishable from the healthy controls.[38] While microvascular flow was more heterogeneous in transplant recipients, the total density of small vessels and the proportion that were perfused was not significantly worse than controls.[32] In the coronary microcirculation, transplant recipients were found to have a significantly reduced coronary flow reserve compared with healthy controls (1.89 "v" 2.65), but better than a group of age-matched hemodialysis patients (1.57).[58]

In those with a failing or failed transplant, the relationship appears to be more complex. Transplant recipients with evidence of interstitial fibrosis and tubular atrophy had sublingual glycocalyx parameters comparable to hemodialysis patients despite their median eGFR of 22 mL/min.[38] Furthermore, patients who return to dialysis after a failed transplant exhibited worse coronary microvascular function than dialysis (both hemodialysis and peritoneal dialysis) patients of similar vintage who have never been transplanted.[67,94] The known association between inflammation and microvascular dysfunction[76] led the authors to speculate that inflammation associated with the failed allograft was partially responsible for the deterioration, in both these studies the failed transplant recipients had higher inflammatory markers than the transplant naïve group. This is an interesting hypothesis although the underlying pathology is likely to be multifaceted. While time on dialysis may have been similar between groups the patients with failed transplant are likely to have had a longer period with end-stage renal failure, additionally they will have been exposed to immunosuppressant medications such as calcineurin inhibitors, with known vascular effects.[95] As discussed above, changes to the microcirculation occur throughout the stages of chronic renal disease and what is not clear from this study is how changes in the failing transplant group compare to patients with a native eGFR of 22 mL/min.

9 | ISSUES IN THE CURRENT LITERATURE

Comparison of studies in this area is impeded by methodological issues. By its nature the microcirculation exhibits significant temporal and spatial heterogeneity.[81] Consequently, most of the techniques outlined above have to contend with substantial intra-subject variability. Much of the literature reviewed here is cross-sectional; therefore, there will be significant variability in the outcome measures, reducing their ability to detect small differences between patient groups for example.

There are other experimental issues pertinent to studying a renal cohort. End-stage renal disease is a phenotype, not a specific pathology and therefore renal cohorts are also heterogeneous. Secular, geographic, and ethnic variation impact prevalent primary and co-morbid pathologies, many of which have direct relevance to the microcirculation such as diabetes and hypertension. There is also high usage in this population of medications known to impact microvascular reactivity.

Studying patients undergoing an intermittent therapy, such as hemodialysis, presents its own challenges; as outlined above, timing of investigations is important, this varies both between and within studies.[36] Rapidly changing flow and hematocrit, changes in room and dialysate temperature, different compositions of dialysate and method of vascular access are all likely to affect the results of these non-invasive techniques. Perhaps more importantly, such a hemodynamic insult is likely to affect each vascular bed differently.

These inherent methodological issues are often compounded by small sample sizes.

10 | POTENTIAL FUTURE WORK

The issues identified above mean several gaps remain in our knowledge with regards the state of the microcirculation as measured using these non-invasive techniques. What is required to adequately delineate the natural history of microvascular dysfunction in chronic kidney disease and dialysis are large-scale, longitudinal studies in a variety of vascular beds with consensus on timing of investigations.

Along with the heterogeneous nature of a renal cohort there are also several treatment options available for renal replacement therapy. The two main forms of dialysis offered to patients, hemodialysis and peritoneal dialysis, are intrinsically different and likely to affect the systemic microcirculation in distinct ways. As a result of its acute hemodynamic effects and by virtue of the fact that they account for the large majority of the dialysis population, most microvascular work in dialysis patients has, to date, focused on hemodialysis. Studies investigating microcirculatory properties in peritoneal dialysis patients lag behind their hemodialysis contemporaries. When

peritoneal dialysis patients are included in cohorts they are often analyzed with the hemodialysis patients under the umbrella of "dialysis requiring". Attempts to analyze them as a sub-group are undermined by small numbers.[27]

Peritoneal dialysis has been demonstrated to have cardiovascular effects[18] but they are both qualitatively and quantitatively different from those of hemodialysis. There are also other challenges unique to peritoneal dialysis which need examining, most notably the effect of absorbed glucose. There is a body of work examining the effects of peritoneal dialysis fluid variants on macrohemodynamic measures such as blood pressure and cardiac output.[87,96,97] Similar work examining effects on the microcirculation could allow intervention at an earlier stage in the pathological process. The functionality of peritoneal dialysis is largely dependent on the structure and integrity of the peritoneal microcirculation. Are there insights to be gained from the systemic microcirculation that may increase understanding and aid preservation of the peritoneal circulation?[42,98]

Despite these gaps in knowledge there is increasing evidence of microcirculatory dysfunction in dialysis cohorts that precedes large vessel disease and is associated with morbidity and mortality. This dysfunction appears to be the result of multiple insults including; uremia and its consequences, that is, chronic renal disease, mineral bone disease; co-morbid pathologies such as hypertension and diabetes and renal replacement therapy itself. This should emphasize to the clinician the importance of primary preventative strategies already enshrined in clinical practice such as dialysis adequacy targets, stringent blood pressure control, and correction of bone mineral abnormalities. Greater insights into the pathophysiology of microvascular dysfunction in these patients could advance clinical care of dialysis patients in several ways. It could improve our understanding of the potential benefits of commonly used medications such as ACE inhibitors, routinely used in proteinuric renal disease, there is evidence for a protective effect on systemic vascular endothelium in animal models of aging[99] and heart failure.[100] It could help us understand how best to administer renal replacement therapies; for example, the potential benefits of more "extended" hemodialysis.[76] It could also aid development of more novel therapies aimed at protecting endothelial function such as eNOS transcriptase enhancers.[101]

11 | CONCLUSION

The importance of the microcirculation in systemic diseases is becoming increasingly apparent. Historically, study of the microcirculation in patients with renal disease especially those on dialysis has lagged behind other chronic conditions. Difficulties in studying a heterogeneous patient group on intermittent therapies may have contributed to this disparity.

Studies have been small and largely cross-sectional. More traditional techniques for studying the microcirculation were often cumbersome and time consuming reducing their clinical utility. We are now gaining greater understanding of the role of newer, more patient friendly techniques such as SDF imaging which should allow expansion of participant numbers.

Reproducible differences in microvascular structure and abnormal function have been demonstrated in multiple vascular beds in dialysis patients compared with controls. The exact nature and chronology of these changes are yet to be fully defined.

As we anticipate an ever-expanding chronic renal disease population with its disproportionate cardiovascular burden, a greater understanding of this dysfunction becomes increasingly important. Large-scale longitudinal studies are required to achieve this with the hope that the knowledge gained will guide future interventions to abrogate cardiovascular risk for these patients.

PERSPECTIVE

The importance of the systemic microcirculation in renal disease is increasingly appreciated. A growing body of work using non-invasive, in vivo techniques is expanding our knowledge of the nature and chronology of microvascular dysfunction. Future work should focus on whether early intervention in the pathological process will reduce cardiovascular risk.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the support of the NIHR Exeter Clinical Research Facility and Kidney Research UK grant number TF_013_20151127. All opinions reflected here are those of the authors and not those of NIHR or the UK Department of Health.

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How to cite this article: Williams J, Gilchrist M, Strain D, Fraser D, Shore A. The systemic microcirculation in dialysis populations. *Microcirculation*. 2020;00:1–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/micc.12613